

# **School Administrators' Perceptions of the Achievement Gap between African American Students and White Students**

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



**Jonathan Royle**  
*Mesquite Independent School District*  
**Casey Graham Brown**  
*University of Texas at Arlington*

*This study included an analysis of principal perceptions of the achievement gap between African American and White students. School administrators from campuses with a substantial number of African American students within the subgroup were interviewed to explore their perceptions of the achievement gap. The study revealed factors within the principal's role that affect academic achievement with African American students. The three themes that developed from structured analysis of interview data were: (a) staff must build authentic relationships to increase students' intrinsic motivation, (b) needs-driven instruction generates higher individual student achievement, and (c) staff members require professional development to meet students' needs.*

## **Introduction**

The consistent underperformance of African American students casts a disparaging shadow on the success of American public schools. African American students have performed at a rate far below White counterparts since the beginning of formal American educational history (Kunjufu, 2005). Academic progress for students in this subpopulation has improved significantly since the beginning of the 1900s, however, as of 2012, African American students continued to maintain an average achievement gap of close to 30 points lower than their White counterparts between

1978 and 2008 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2012). The issue remains, despite “real gains in academic achievement. . . too many African American students still are not getting the quality education they need and deserve, and the performance of African American students lags far behind that of white students” (The Education Trust, 2014, p. 2).

The existence of the achievement gap has puzzled researchers since the beginning of American educational history (Butchart, 2010; Kunjufu, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2012). Researchers have agreed that data show an achievement gap continued to persist throughout the 21<sup>st</sup> century and was a significant problem to student progress nationwide (Butchart, 2010; Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Johnson, 2002; Kunjufu, 2000).

Researchers have shown the extensive history of neglect of resources toward African American students contributing to an achievement gap between African American and White subpopulations in education (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Kozol, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2012; NCES, 2012). African American students “receive fewer of the within-school resources and experiences that are known to contribute to academic achievement” (The Education Trust, 2014, p. 2). The achievement gap continues to plague American public schools (The Education Trust, 2014).

Administrators have the influence to establish a culture of excellence and craft campus policies affecting student achievement (Bulris, 2010; Papalewis & Fortune, 2002). Principals focus on many different aspects of management and instruction to create a campus culture where scores increase (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). Developing staff, hiring and maintaining staff, and creating a culture of excellence are examples of the impact the school principal has on student achievement scores and success (Bulris, 2010). While a wealth of research exists pertaining to the achievement gap (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Kunjufu, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009), supportive techniques in closing the gap (Denbo, 2002; Kunjufu, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009), and even understanding the power of principal leadership (Bulris, 2010; Gay, 2004; Papalewis & Fortune, 2002), limited qualitative research has explored the perceptions of principals in narrowing the achievement gap.

## **Theoretical Framework**

This research project emphasized race as an important factor in exploring administrators’ perceptions of the achievement gap, thus critical race theory was utilized as a framework for investigating the voices of the school leaders (Ladson-Billings, 1999). Critical race theory provided the theoretical framework for comprehending how the discourse of racism and race operate with social structures (in this case, schools). One component of critical race theory includes the telling of stories and accounts to “analyze the myths, presuppositions, and received wisdoms that make up the common culture about race and that invariably render blacks and other minorities one-down” (Delgado, 1995, p. xiv).

The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore administrators’ perceptions of the achievement gap. The intent was to determine the level of influence principals possessed on narrowing the achievement gap between African American and White subpopulations. Understanding the strategies or practices successful in providing an increase in student achievement can help administrators make valuable changes to the practices and culture on their campuses and affect student academic performance. Armed with a realization that principals do, in fact, have the power to narrow the achievement gap on their campuses, principals can continue to address the complex problem.

## **Background Literature**

The importance of understanding the reasons behind the gaps in achievement between racial sub-groups has been the driving force of much research to improve education (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2012). Researchers have shown that social/emotional obstacles of self-worth and confidence, teacher perceptions of student ability, test bias, and instructional strategies or techniques used to implement instruction have contributed to the gap (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 2009). Kunjufu (2005) agreed that “teacher expectations, tracking, parental involvement, student self-esteem, curriculum, learning styles, test bias, and peer pressure” (p. 1) contribute to maintaining an achievement gap.

## **Using Researched Poverty Strategies**

Schools and districts combine poverty with race when designing strategies to combat low achievement of African American students (Kunjufu, 2006). A concern that was raised with the awareness of poverty in education was that low socioeconomic students are viewed as “deficit-laden. . .less capable, less cultured, and less worthy as learners” (Sato, 2009, p. 365). Comparing students in the African American subpopulation to students who fall into the low socioeconomic category has not proven to close the gap effectively (Kunjufu, 2006).

Poverty does not seem to be a precipitating factor of the achievement gap. Yoshikawa, Aber, and Beardslee (2012) found that “the effect of poverty is independent of associated factors such as levels of parental education or race/ethnicity; there is little evidence that the harmful impact of poverty on child or youth M-E-B [mental-emotional-behavioral] health differs by race/ethnicity” (p. 280).

## **Impact of School Leadership**

To clarify the role of an administrator and his or her impact, “we must understand how a principal can shape the mediating factors such as school climate, culture, and instructional organization, ranging from school policies and norms, to the practices of teachers” (Bulris, 2010, p. 29). Reeves (2009) posited that the principal has an important impact on student success by shaping the climate and making changes on the campus that affect not only the students, but the teachers as well. In another study, Porter, Polikoff, Coldring, Murphy, Elliott, and May (2010) concluded, “leadership is the central ingredient in school success defined in terms of value added to student achievement” (p. 282).

Bulris (2010) determined that if “principals are often the first to be held accountable for a school that fails to meet state and/or federal accountability standards and find themselves at the center of the accountability movement” (p. 1), then it would seem that efforts to close the achievement gap would be focused on the principal. Other researchers have highlighted positive campus changes when student scores were within a principal’s scope of power, such as principals’ impacts on hiring and maintaining effective teachers, building and implementing strong staff development plans that maintain successful teachers on campus, and creating a culture of excellence on campus (Jencks & Phillips, 1998; Johnson, 2002; Kozol, 2005; Kunjufu, 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2012).

Marzano et al. (2005) explored the importance of supporting and maintaining effective teachers and generating a positive school climate and culture that values education through the

use of a leadership team developed by the school leader. Bulris (2010) found, “a strong moderate effect of school culture on student achievement” (p. 158), noting the importance the principal plays in creating that culture.

High-quality schools have an effect on the achievement gap; “community investments coupled with high-quality schools drive these results, but community investments alone cannot” (Dobbie & Fryer, 2009, p. 28). As the leader of the campus, the principal has a tremendous effect on the quality of the school.

## **Method**

This phenomenological study included an analysis of the reasons for the achievement gap and solutions through the lens of campus principals. Interview data were collected from 11 school principals in the state of Texas. The administrators had substantial populations of African American students on their campuses and direct input into the supports chosen and implemented on the campus level. A variety of sampling methods were used to select participants for the study. Snowball, criterion, and convenience sampling were used to select participants in this study.

The following research questions guided the study:

1. What do principals perceive as the factors or actions that lead to an increase in African American students’ academic test scores?
2. What do principals perceive as the factors or actions that lead to a decrease in African American students’ academic test scores?
3. What do principals perceive are the characteristics of an effective teacher of diverse groups of learners?
4. What do principals perceive are administrators’ roles in affecting the success of African American students?

Semi-structured interviews were conducted. Field notes, interview transcriptions, and statistical information from Texas’s Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) were used to provide a picture of the phenomenon of the achievement gap. The data were highlighted and coded through transcribed interviews; themes emerged following the analysis of codes.

## **Findings**

Each participant was given a pseudonym to protect his or her identity. Joan, Matthew, Abigail, Elisabeth, Paul, Leslie, Ruth, Kellie, Gina, Deena, and James were the names selected to represent the participants. Principals ranged in age from 32 to 54 years of age. Three males and eight females were interviewed. Three principals were African American principals and eight were White. The participants were leaders of elementary, intermediate (grades 5 and 6), and high school campuses. All of the principals had earned their master’s degrees; two principals were in the process of obtaining doctoral degrees and three had recently earned doctoral degrees.

Participants attributed positive and genuine relationships between teachers, students, and parents as integral parts of increasing student scores. Joan summarized, “I believe the number one thing we have to do is build relationships.” Instructional strategies that are strategically

designed with the individual student's needs in mind are most successful in improving student test scores. Some of these practices involved analyzing data to determine student needs, designing specific strategies, and implementing them effectively. The participants described staff development as vital to providing necessary changes in staff perspectives to improve the instruction that is implemented. The better the teacher is able to determine the specific needs of students, the more likely the teacher will be able to increase student performance. According to the principals, building authentic relationships with students, individualizing instruction to meet the diverse needs of students, and providing professional staff development contribute to an increase in students' test scores.

According to the principals interviewed, when teacher-student or teacher-parent relationships break down the student suffers lower academic achievement. *Forcing* a relationship through false intentions was ineffective at building the authenticity necessary for successful relationships with students. Student academic performance also decreased when teachers did not analyze data regularly or attempt to know well the student and his or her specific needs. The teacher is unable to provide prescribed and individualized instruction to students in a manner that allows students to improve test scores if he or she has not analyzed data. According to the principals, retention, ineffective tutoring, a lack of genuine relationships built on trust, and class size in excess of 22 students were a few of the ineffective practices and strategies that continued to impact the achievement gap negatively.

Throughout the interviews, the principals referred to the characteristics effective teachers need to be successful in teaching diverse groups of students. Kellie indicated that her teachers were effective when they considered the positive results of using visuals in their classrooms and attempted to bridge the cultural gap. Paul viewed the impact of understanding data to find the specific and individual needs of students and prescribe instruction based on student needs. James shared the importance of motivating students intrinsically by providing a reason to further their education. According to James, teachers must ask specific questions of students: "are those students intrinsically motivated? Do they see the connection and the value of having a good strong education? If they do, then the other piece would be having those support mechanisms in place to help those students." According to the principals, effective teachers exhibit these characteristics and are innately able to develop the authentic relationship concurrently.

A common thread found throughout the principals' responses was the intense sense of responsibility the principals had toward the instruction occurring on their respective campuses. Equally as important, said the principals, was the value of making authentic connections with students and their parents. Paul referred to this when he explained how he would gain the trust of the parents, then, "I could tell the parent whatever I needed to and they would support me the best they could." His ability to generate trust with parents gave him permission to do whatever was necessary to help students succeed. Gina reflected, "I just think if we continue on the path of keeping them engaged, continue on the path of building relationships, continue on the path of disaggregating data, and seeing where they are weak," then she could make the changes necessary to affect the achievement gap.

Analysis of interview data produced three overarching themes: (a) staff must build authentic relationships to increase students' intrinsic motivation, (b) needs-driven instruction generates higher individual student achievement, and (c) staff members require professional development to meet students' needs. Each theme was subdivided into supporting subthemes.

## **Staff Must Build Authentic Relationships to Increase Students' Intrinsic Motivation**

The theme most prevalent in this study was the significance of staff members building authentic relationships to increase students' motivation to succeed. The theme of authentic relationships also was woven into the fabric of other themes as principals described the importance of instruction based on the specific needs of students, or professional development training. Participants believed that authentic relationships were the key to increase intrinsic motivation in students. Shaping an authentic relationship takes time and energy in order to incorporate the trust and respect necessary for authenticity.

The principals described the power of authentic relationships that motivated intrinsically. Leslie expressed concern with the amount of time needed to build genuine relationships. Kellie believed African American students would, "work for someone and not something." According to the principals, students seemed to produce better results academically when they worked for the teachers with whom they enjoyed a genuine relationship. Ruth noted positive changes in performance for a difficult student on her campus. She attributed his significant academic gains to "the relationship [the teacher] has with that particular student." The participants shared that teachers must create genuine relationships to improve achievement among students. Matthew summarized, "essentially it's about relationships."

Participants repeatedly remarked that building a genuine relationship was significantly important to improving academic success with students. Students would respond to an authentic relationship with, "now I want to work for you because I like you, and I want you to be proud of me because I like you. . . I don't want to disappoint you, I don't want to embarrass you because I like you," said Joan. Leslie further described the power of authentic relationships:

I think all people in general when they feel like you are investing in them as a person and you're attempting to create a relationship. . . They're going to be more open to you and to what it is you're trying to share with them or teach them.

The participants agreed that while a genuine relationship took time to build, the benefits outweighed the effort involved.

The principals shared that genuine relationships between teachers and students successfully improved test scores. They provided multiple examples of how student performance increased because an authentic relationship existed between a student and his or her teacher. According to Kellie, both principal and teacher play an integral part in helping a student overcome challenges. She told the student, "bad news is you haven't passed. . . the good news is. . . you can." Kellie continued, "she. . . busted out crying, sitting in my office, and. . . said, 'no one ever told me anything like that.'" That student moved several times and finally enrolled in Kellie's campus again, this time in high school. Kellie visited with the student about her scores as a junior. The student told Kellie, "My counselor just called [my last school] and got my scores, and I passed." This student had never been told that she could succeed.

Analysis of interview data relating to the theme *staff must build authentic relationships to increase students' intrinsic motivation* supported two subthemes: (a) authentic relationships require authentic actions, influential communication, and essential provisions, and (b) relationships must be built with parents. Ladson-Billings (2009) advocated for genuine and authentic relationships between teacher and students and believed that the process involved seeking out student activities outside of the classroom; going to a student's practice or game,

watching a performance, or attending an awards ceremony were a few examples. Ladson-Billings (2009) and Singleton and Linton (2006) posited that the instruction had to be culturally relevant to improve student achievement.

### **Needs-Driven Instruction Generates Higher Individual Student Achievement**

The necessity to provide specific instruction to students was the second most prevalent theme. Principals believed that teachers had to understand students well enough to provide curriculum and instruction tailored to meet the specific needs of students. Students who needed repetition, smaller group instruction, or even visual representations were common examples of needs-driven instruction.

Elisabeth's most academically successful teachers were considered to be at the "top of their game." Those teachers were able to achieve better scores than other teachers on her campus. Elisabeth described their effective instruction: "I think it comes back to how intentional the teacher is. How well the teacher knows. . .content, how creative they can be in presenting the content, how much the teacher values the student's time in the classroom." Leslie supported the notion that good instruction is effective at supporting the diverse groups of learners, regardless of race. Her teachers were focused on the needs of each individual student and analyzed data regularly in an effort to provide instruction tailored to help him or her specifically. Leslie explained, "good quality instructional strategies are going to work with whatever kid you put them in front of."

The theme *needs-driven instruction generates higher individual student achievement* was divided into supporting subthemes: (a) data should be used to drive instructional decisions, (b) high expectations should be established to encourage student success, and (c) small groups should be utilized to personalize instruction. Marzano et al. (2005) indicated that the responsibilities of the principal are to be directly involved in the design of the curriculum used in the classroom, review data and generate an action plan, and confront issues in instruction not conducive to improved student achievement. Ladson-Billings (2009) and Singleton and Linton (2006) believed that the instruction must be culturally relevant to improve student achievement.

### **Staff Members Need Professional Development to Meet Students' Needs**

The third overarching theme was related to the professional development necessary to improve student achievement. Principals shared that closing the achievement gap between African American and White students on their campuses meant that changes were in order. Some of the changes required teachers to be more aware of data. Other changes necessary to narrow the achievement gap required that principals provide staff development on mindset changes or perspectives. Principals tended to agree that change was necessary because the achievement gap continued to exist on each of their campuses.

The theme *staff members need professional development to meet students' needs* exposed the need for staff development in three areas: (a) tear down teacher-created barriers, (b) provide training on the importance of building relationships, and (c) provide training on cultural differences.

Singleton and Linton (2006) provided significant steps for administrators attempting to close the achievement gap on campus by bridging the racial differences. Ladson-Billings (2009) supported the need for teachers to develop culturally relevant instruction which included the art

of getting to know the students well enough to be able to provide effective instruction. This requires that principals delve deeper into the professional development presented to staff members who have the most direct effect on student achievement scores.

## **Discussion and Implications**

According to The Education Trust (2014), “gaps exist before children enter school, but inequitable and insufficient opportunities to learn exacerbate the gaps between African American students and their white peers and contribute to African American students’ low performance” (p. 9). Federal legislation, state legislation, and local districts have been unsuccessful in their attempts to close the gap. As the achievement gap between African American and White students persists, questions persevere, begging for answers to close the gap. In attempting to explain the gap, political arguments involving diversity and the socioeconomic status of students have been futile in narrowing the gap.

Principals are faced with difficult decisions daily—decisions concerning facility upkeep; financial decisions; and decisions pertaining to student discipline, instruction, and more (Marzano et al., 2005). By far, the most important decision that a principal can make involves building a culture of excellence on campus (Bulris, 2010). Educators have to determine the action items that are within their control. The complex problem of the achievement gap between African American and White students needs solutions that are practical and effective.

Participants in this study and the teachers they described seemed genuinely concerned about finding solutions to improve scores among African American students on their campuses. Responses were heartfelt; principals attempted to provide possible reasons and solutions to the problem of underachieving subpopulations on their campuses. In the well-meaning intentions of participants, the reasons for the persistence of an achievement gap were exposed.

Principals attempting to narrow the achievement gap between African American and White subpopulations on their campuses must apply three practical measures with staff members. These measures coincide with the three themes in this study. Staff members must build authentic relationships to increase students’ intrinsic motivation. Needs-driven instruction must be fostered, which generates higher individual student achievement. Staff members should be provided with professional development to build capacity and better meet students’ needs. Each measure needed to close the gap is a basic and general focal point guiding principals in the decisions that occur at the campus administrative level.

Building genuine relationships based on the authentic actions, influential communication, and essential provisions was found to have a profound impact on student performance. Principals shared that students worked for the teachers they loved. Authenticity was a necessary component of the relationship if the teachers intended to improve scores. Principals need to incorporate measures within this goal to encourage teachers to connect with students and their parents. Teachers should be held accountable for parent-teacher communications and meetings with students. Principals should facilitate training on building authenticity into relationships with students.

Instruction delivered to students was more effective when it was prescribed to meet their specific needs. To ensure instruction was specific teachers had to analyze data regularly, determine a plan to proactively remediate any problems, and implement the plan. Analysis of student achievement data required teachers to determine students’ strengths and weaknesses and to be specific when determining the most important issues to tackle. Prioritizing students’ skill

deficits helps teachers focus on the more important issues first. The most effective method of delivery, according to the participants, was instruction in small group settings where teachers were able to focus on specific student needs. Action items to help principals focus on instruction include teachers accountability with data analysis, meeting with teachers regularly to discuss data and ensure proper analysis, and incorporating training for teachers to understand and plan small group interactions and instruction more effectively.

An integral part of changing the persistent trend of the achievement gap was to determine the professional development necessary for staff members. Understanding the racial and social divide that may exist between teachers and students is a focal point for professional development. Changing some of the practices that contribute to the widening of the achievement gap is another focus for campus training. The principals shared that some of the most successful practices in closing the gap were found in building relationships and in needs-driven instruction. Singleton and Linton (2006) described necessary professional development to evaluate and possibly change the perceptions existing among staff concerning different cultures and races. The researchers proposed a deep analysis of cultural and traditional practices that characterize the campus. Singleton and Linton (2006) challenged principals to provide professional development that demands that staff members recognize and process perceptions that may be hindering success with students. As staff members evaluate personal perceptions, the training that Kellie discussed, with educational consultants such as Farrell Artis or Ruby Payne, becomes more effective and “life-altering.”

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

This study explored the perceptions that existed among principals pertaining to the achievement gap between African American and White subpopulations. Viewing the phenomenon through the lens of the principal provided a voice to administrators attempting to narrow the achievement gap on their campuses. Further research is necessary to understand the perspectives of the achievement gap that exist among teachers, students, and parents. Further examination of their would provide a better and more complete insight into the achievement gap.

Kozol (2005) believed that educators want to make a difference. Sometimes, successful strategies tried in a new setting or attempted without the same demographics of students or staff fail; with each failure the achievement gap widens. Abigail related with empathy, “they do the things that we’ve been told to do but . . . our gap is not closing.” A gap is apparent between what is understood and what is accomplished. The questions that arise from this perplexing situation implicate a neglect of implementation of strategies or issues with the fidelity with which they are implemented.

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